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Autor: Lettau, Marc
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A home full of wanderlust

Karl Fürchtegott Grob from Switzerland set off for Sumatra in 1869, engaged thousands of men to labour on his plantations and became incredibly wealthy within just a few years. The villa that he built on his return to Zurich is a lavish treasure chest of irritatingly un-Swiss opulence. The magnificent home of this contentious Swiss abroad is now set to become the new flagship building of the Swiss Heritage Society.

By Marc Lettau

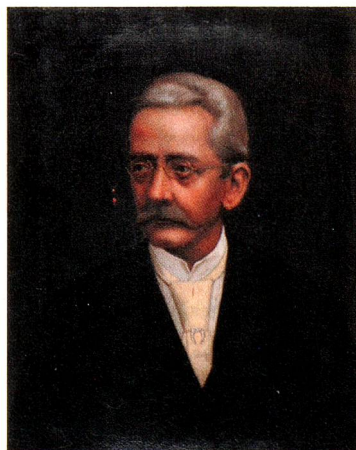


Villa Patumbah and park in Zollikerstrasse, Zurich

It is sometimes hard not to wax lyrical. The Villa Patumbah in Zurich, for example, leaves even the most sober-minded of people awestruck because the home built between 1883 and 1885 in the Riesbach district is a truly extraordinary architectural treasure trove. At first sight, the villa resembles a Mediterranean palazzo with its spacious grounds. But upon entering the gallery, which leads into the villa, visitors are abruptly transported to a far-flung exotic location. The painted canopy reveals the colour and design schemes of Sumatra. You then step into the brightly coloured world of Art Nouveau – admittedly just for a brief moment, as your attention is drawn to the three heavy doors that provide access to the magnificent rooms of the “bel étage”.

The door on the left leads into the “master’s room” and takes you back to the golden age of the Renaissance. The inlays are ornate and the coffered ceiling follows rigid design forms. The door on the

right leads into a light blue and pink icing sugar world of Rococo – this is the “lady’s room” with its gaiety transformed into architecture. Angels of varying sizes, bordered by ornate stucco decorations, hover over the ceiling. Between the master’s and lady’s rooms is the lounge entirely furnished with dark walnut. Here visitors



Karl Fürchtegott Grob

encounter the stately gravitas of Gothic style. Anyone who dines here banquets in a hall of knights.

Climbing the stairs to the upper floors we approach the zenith of opulence. After Art Nouveau, Renaissance, Rococo and Gothic, here we find an exotic blaze of colour, a two-storey hall extending to the roof with painted pillars and balustrades. Far-eastern mythical creatures – lucky dragons – adorn the glass dome, which lets daylight into the hall. A large, round glass lens is embedded into the floor of the hall; the light entering through the lucky dragon glass dome is reflected by the lens into the lower-lying “bel étage”, undoubtedly to give the splendour even greater lustre.

But is this not something of a colonial mishmash? The ostentatiously exhibited wealth of a super-rich man? Or is it great architecture? Modern-day architectural critics are inclined towards the latter viewpoint because a wide range of distinctive styles have been skilfully interwoven here

in a confined space to produce a harmonious whole.

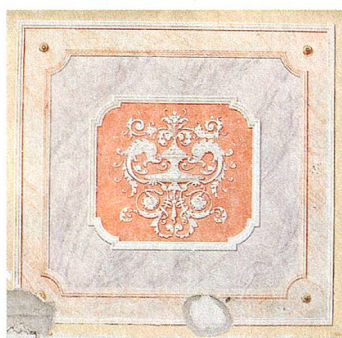
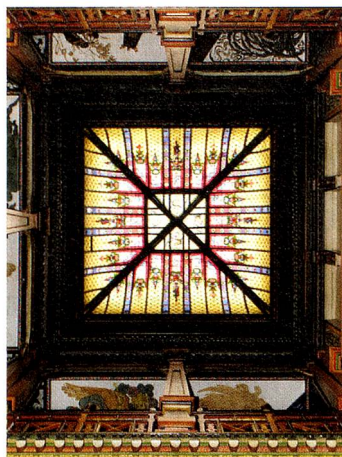
Fürchtegott the fearless

This project in Riesbach was undoubtedly a highly ambitious one, and the man behind it was Karl Fürchtegott Grob (1832-1893). This adventure-seeking baker's son from Zurich's Niederdorf district was enticed by the great wealth on offer in the Dutch colony of Sumatra. In 1869, he sailed to Sumatra with his business partner Hermann Näher and initially attempted to grow nutmeg. However, he quickly switched to the cultivation of tobacco, where money could be made easily. Five years after their arrival, "Näher and Grob" had already secured 25,000 hectares of land. The work was arduous. Tropical rainforests had to be cleared for the plantations. The local farmers effectively ousted by colonisation could not be enticed to work on the plantations. "Näher and Grob" therefore concentrated on imported labour. Around 1875, the two Swiss tobacco growers employed some 2,500 workers from China and 1,800 from Java and India.

Grob was something of a soldier of fortune among Western businessmen, according to the historian Andreas Zangger, who wrote his dissertation on the impact of the Swiss in Sumatra and revealed that while Switzerland did not possess any colonies of its own it nevertheless developed a form of Swiss colonialism. Grob seized his opportunity at the right time, says Zangger: "Grob profited from the tobacco boom in Sumatra more than any other Swiss. By entering the business early, he very quickly made a fortune, whereas others lost a lot of money." The soldier of fortune returned to Switzerland after ten years. He left Sumatra in 1880 with caskets filled to the brim. The date of his return journey was also fortuitous as the violent eruption of the Krakatoa volcano destroyed large parts of Sumatra just three years later. Twenty cubic kilometres (20 billion cubic metres) of ash and rock were hurled into the Earth's atmosphere, and tens of thousands of people died in the shower of lava and ash and in the tsunami caused by the volcanic eruption.

Back in Zurich

Back in Zurich, Grob married the much younger Anna Dorothea Zundel and looked for a good piece of land with a view of Lake Zurich. He commissioned the two eminent



villa architects Alfred Chiodera and Theophil Tschudi to build his grandiose home. He set the architects few restrictions and provided them with almost unlimited resources.

But Grob's vision extended beyond architecture. With his villa, this cosmopolitan, well-travelled and wealthy man reinforced a commonly held ideal of home in Switzerland – home meant a dwelling rooted in the familiar. Having departed as a baker's son and returned a wealthy businessman, he also wanted to build the villa to create a new societal home to underline his credentials as a member of Zurich's upper echelons.

Amid all this single-mindedness, his dream villa with its display of splendour became a home full of wanderlust. PATUMBAH, written in big letters beneath the roof, means "much-longed-for land" in Malay. Although Grob had returned home he had seemingly not cast off his wanderlust. Such longings ended eight years after moving into the villa. In 1893, Grob died of a tropical illness picked up in Sumatra.

Undeniable significance

A man explores the world, acquires great wealth and builds himself a splendid villa – and everyone marvels at the incredible building. If this was all there was to the story of Grob and his villa it would be

somewhat banal. However, the fact is that much of the villa's significance is only now coming to light. The Villa Patumbah actually also reveals the "pragmatic" Swiss attitude towards the extraordinary. The social welfare institution Diakoniewerk Neumünster set up a retirement home in the villa in 1930 – no far-eastern colour then, but an unostentatious grey: most of the interior rooms were painted white to avoid overwhelming the pensioners with too much colour, frivolity and opulence. Urban development has also had an impact on the villa. The view of the lake has long since disappeared. Patumbah and its grounds were increasingly becoming the "much-longed-for land" of property developers, with the villa itself at risk of demolition and at the centre of political and legal wrangling for many years.

Swiss heritage centre

Over the past three years, the whitewashed art in the villa has been uncovered layer by layer. After years of uncertainty, the Patumbah Foundation has managed to save the estate and to secure funding to maintain it. In 2009, it also became clear what purpose the renovated villa would be put to in future. The Swiss Heritage Society founded in 1905 is renting the Villa Patumbah and



- Glass dome and paintings on the exterior façade
- Gallery on the upper floor
- Entrance hall
- Paintings in the lady's room (from left to right)

using it for its heritage centre. Visitors to the centre, which will open in August, are to gain an insight into Swiss architectural culture through an interactive exhibition and various educational initiatives. The estate, which represents all of Switzerland's buildings of historical importance to a degree, is likely to revive the debate on how the nation should deal with its architectural heritage. Karin Artho, an art historian and head of the heritage centre that is set to open, believes the villa with its chequered history is a "godsend" for heritage. She remarks: "A visit to the Villa Patumbah will be a highly enjoyable experience even for people not especially interested in heritage." You could not wish for a better introduction, she says.

New concerns

The opening of the heritage centre has been accompanied by a development that is already causing concern to heritage conservationists. Karin Artho says: "The change in energy policy, which everyone is calling out for, has to be supported but not at the expense of our cultural heritage." In broad terms, the heritage conservationists fear that the withdrawal from nuclear power will see the heritage preservation threshold significantly lowered. Artho points out that

the installation of solar power units on historical buildings is no longer taboo in many places. Switzerland's heritage-protected buildings are also under pressure from the "necessary trend towards more densely concentrated construction". Artho is particularly concerned about the growing pressure to stop renovating houses and instead to replace them with energy-efficient new builds. Patumbah therefore also has symbolic significance for them. "Authorisation had been granted to demolish this villa as well," she says.

Is heritage conservation seeking to preserve Switzerland's urban backdrop? Artho rejects this claim. "A country's heritage must change. Every generation should leave its mark. What is constructed today should reflect modern design," she says. Heritage conservationists are nevertheless fighting to preserve buildings possessing particular qualities and "period character". This certainly does not just include historical buildings, but often contemporary ones, too: "We are also endeavouring to protect buildings that most people have not yet even recognised as being significant." Heritage conservationists have no interest in simply preserving architectural culture. "Saving a building that is not going to be restored makes no

sense," Artho says. In the case of the Villa Patumbah, the heritage conservationists themselves will oversee the building's restoration.

The greatest slave owner of his time?

All's well that ends well? The newly renovated Villa Patumbah calls for more light to be shed on the background to Grob's wealth. Grob's success is certainly not explained by hard graft alone. Was he a callous employer? To put it bluntly, was he one of the greatest Swiss slave owners of his time? There can be no doubt that Grob, too, treated his workers in Sumatra in a heavy-handed way. Chinese day labourers were regarded more like machines than human beings. Contemporaries nevertheless also described Grob as "generous, dynamic and knowledgeable". It is therefore conceivable that he was only "moderately exploitative". It is also said that Grob's widow Anna Dorothea bestowed the Villa Patumbah on Diakoniewerk Neumünster because she could not bear the thought that her home had been paid for with the blood of slaves.

MARC LETTAU is an editor with the "Swiss Review"

www.heimatschutz.ch
www.stiftung-patumbah.ch